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Is There a “Greater Turkey” On the Rise?

albiladdailyeng.com/greater-turkey-rise/

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Ryan Gingeras

Late in July, a sharp debate erupted over a rather innocuous statement published on the [website](#) of Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Its focus was the annual commemoration acknowledging the Treaty of Lausanne, the 1923 accord establishing Turkey’s independence and sovereignty after the First World War. The wording of the message was similar to past statements honoring the agreement and identified the treaty as among the “foundational documents of the Turkish Republic.”

According to critics, the statement flew in the face of comments recently made by President Erdogan. In an address before a congress of local mayors in September 2016, Erdogan railed against both the West and the post- First World War Turkish government for having ever agreed to the treaty. The agreement was but one example, he claimed, of a historic effort by Western government to deny Turks lands that belonged to them. He specifically [cited](#) Aegean islands granted to Greece in 1923, which were home to what he called “our mosques and our tombs.” Erdogan assigned equal blame to the representatives of Turkey’s first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who negotiated the agreement. Lausanne was no great victory, he concluded, but a distressing event that continues to plague Turks.

The controversy over Erdogan's statements reflects an emerging trend in Turkish politics. Within the last year it has become increasingly common for government representatives, including Erdogan, to openly question the adequacy or legitimacy of Turkey's borders. This irredentist tendency has become increasingly significant as Turkey's occupation of northern Syria passes its first anniversary. While it is possible Erdogan's musings over the country's borders may prove hollow, aspects of Ankara's policy in Syria, as well as the likelihood of future Turkish incursions elsewhere in Syria and Iraq, suggest that de facto border changes may occur.

Erdogan's criticism of the Treaty of Lausanne certainly appears in line with the presumed "neo-Ottoman" tilt of his ruling Justice and Development Party (or AKP). It is indeed commonplace to see tweets and comments from AKP representatives that argue for Ankara's rights to old imperial territories, as well as Turkey's contemporary influence in lands once under Ottoman imperial rule.

One can also interpret Erdogan's irredentist claims as a sign of the growing electoral influence of Turkey's old, ultra-nationalist base. Before the AKP's rise, calls for Turkey to reclaim lost Ottoman territories in the Levant and Balkans were historically associated with hard-right groups, such as the Nationalist Action Party and Great Unity Party. Today the leaders of both parties are among Erdogan's most vocal supporters. To maintain his appeal to these groups, Erdogan has increasingly appropriated much of the rhetoric and principles of Turkey's extreme right.

In considering these rationales, there is some temptation in seeing Erdogan's irredentism as a departure from the norms of Turkish politics. Among the core dogmas associated with Ataturk, for example, is the notion that Ankara would never pursue territorial claims beyond the borders settled agreed upon at the Treaty of Lausanne. Official statements by Turkey's Foreign Ministry continue to reference Ataturk's famous adage that "peace at home, peace in the world" comes in part through recognizing the "political unity and territorial integrity" of each country.

Yet, there are multiple incidents in Turkish history that suggest an enduring discontent with the country's frontiers. In 1938, the Turkish government helped rig a popular referendum in the Syrian district of Alexandretta, which paved the way for the region to be annexed by the Turkish Republic after Ataturk's death. Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974, ostensibly to protect the island's Turkish speaking minority, gave way to an on-going Turkish military occupation and recurring calls for the annexation of northern Cyprus. To this day, many in the Turkish press speculate over whether Ankara was considering seizing Mosul and the oil-rich region of Kirkuk during the first Gulf War.

Without question, Turkey's invasion and occupation of northern Syria has provided the greatest impetus for Ankara to question the country's current borders. Since the beginning of the Turkish army's incursion, dubbed Operation Euphrates Shield, the limits of the country's "true borders" has been frequently discussed in Turkish newspapers and television programs. Articles and shows, claiming Turkey has a legal or historical right to both invade and annex land in Iraq and Syria, have become commonplace in Turkish media.

Erdogan himself frequently mentions his belief that Turkey enjoys such rights. On more than one occasion, the Turkish president has suggested that military intervention south of the border is justified both by Turkey's current national interests, as well as by the fact that these lands once belonged to the Ottoman Empire. In defending his decision to deploy the army into Syria, Erdogan suggested that Turkey's southern and western borders have been indefensible since the republic's establishment in 1923.

The policies Turkish authorities are implementing in areas under their control in northern Syria further suggest Erdogan's irredentism is more than just rhetoric. A recent Atlantic Council study on Turkish stabilization efforts in Syria offers multiple examples of how the Turkish bureaucracy has become embedded in areas occupied since August 2016. Turkey's Interior Ministry has, for example, largely incorporated lands seized by the Turkish military into a district controlled by the governor of neighboring Turkish province of Gaziantep. Although Syrians are responsible for much of the area's basic services, Ankara asserts a great deal of influence over issues relating to health, education, and other matters of public welfare. This includes maintaining local mosques, whose services and personnel have been taken over by Turkey's Ministry for Religious Affairs (referred to as the Diyanet).

Despite these trends, it would be wise to remain skeptical of Erdogan's calls for territorial expansion, as well as the endurance of the Turkish footprint in Syria and elsewhere. It is often the case that heated claims and demands made by Turkish politicians are at odds with many of the status quo policy choices made in Ankara. One may also doubt Turkey's actual capacity to execute or maintain an expansionist policy in Iraq or Syria, especially given the country's weakening economy and reduced standing vis-a-vie Europe and the United States.

What recent developments do seem to suggest, however, is that Erdogan and his administration are keeping their options open regarding Turkey's future strategic and territorial interests. Ankara may never officially endorse a "Greater Turkey" policy, and will most likely remain vocally committed to restoring the region's internationally recognized borders. That said, it is possible that the lands seized during Operation Euphrates Shield may constitute the northern Cyprus of our time. As in 1974, it is likely that "mission creep", as well as ongoing instability in the greater Middle East, will allow for Turkish expansionism to press forward.

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